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historic preservation: an almost-perfect match

Waite Phillips' executive office restored to former glory

Phillips offices restored to former glory

By MICHAEL OVERALL World Staff Writer Oct 7, 2013

Correction

A photo caption with the original version of this story incorrectly reported the owner of office space in the Philtower. Mathew Brainerd leases the space. The caption has been corrected.

With the office closed for the weekend, interior designer Margaret Ferrell and her husband were getting some work done on a Saturday when somebody knocked, wanting to see inside.

Based on just a few black-and-white photos from 1928, Ferrell spent nearly 18 months restoring Waite Phillips' executive office to its original condition.

And she didn't mind showing it off to a couple of out-of-town visitors, who dropped by unexpectedly last summer.

Hand-painted tiles decorate the walls. Custom-made chandeliers hang from the ceilings. A buffalo hide painstakingly selected by a taxidermist in Montana to match the original spreads across the floor.

Ferrell was missing just a few final touches most notably a couple of paintings that used

to hang in the corner behind Phillips' desk.

The originals were impossible to get. And even copies seemed out of reach until the tourists happened to mention they were on their way to New Mexico, where they were going to visit the oil baron's famous estate, Phil-monte.

"Really?" Ferrell said. "I have just one request."

'Do it correctly, or skip it'

The owner of a chemical company, Mathew Brainerd bought the abandoned Phillips complex on North Peoria in 2002, when contractors told him to bulldoze the crumbling buildings and start over with new construction.

"There's no way I was going to do that," Brainerd says. "It was part of Tulsa's history."

Some of the walls had to be reinforced to keep the red-brick buildings from falling down, but he modernized the facility and put it back in use.

A decade later, his growing company needed more office space.

So Brainerd toured the 21st floor of the Philtower, one of downtown's most iconic landmarks, where Phillips built his corporate headquarters at Fifth Street and Boston Avenue.

The space needed a complete renovation. And, just like the North Peoria property, it would have been faster and cheaper to gut the whole thing and start over.

Brainerd, of course, never considered it.

"If you're going to do it, do it correctly, or just skip it," he says.

"I think the term is 'anal.' And I found someone as anal as I am, and that's Margaret."

Ferrell lost count of how many antique shops she visited in how many different cities, looking for the perfect furniture.

Finally, she gave up and had all the furniture custom-made in Dallas from hand-carved walnut, exact in every detail down to the hardly-noticeable zigzag pattern on the back of a chair in the lobby.

Local artists did the rest.

Walker Zanger matched the original flooring from an old piece of tile that was found behind a radiator.

Dale Gilman made wall sconces to match an original chandelier.

And Tom Barber used old photos to re-create an elaborate fireplace screen made out of copper and bronze.

Phillips used to keep photos of his children on a table near his desk.

So Ferrell dressed Brainerd's kids in period outfits and reproduced the portraits, putting them in exactly the same spot on exactly the same table in exactly the same corner of the room.

To make it perfect, Ferrell just needed those two paintings to hang behind the desk. And the originals were at Philmonte.

'Keep looking'

The tourists sent hi-resolution photos from New Mexico. And after adding some effects to make them look to the naked eye, at least just like real oil paintings, Ferrell found some frames that perfectly match the real ones.

She hung them in Phillips' office last week.

That is, Brainerd's office.

Actually, Brainerd himself still calls it Phillips' office.

"I'm just the caretaker," he says. And while it's not exactly open to the public, Brainerd

happily gives a tour when somebody asks.

At first glance, you won't spot any difference between now and 1928. But look closer.

You might notice a hidden door in the top of Brainerd's desk, where he hides his computer when he's not using it.

And what at first looks like another vintage photo on the wall is really a well-disguised flat-screen TV.

Otherwise, Phillips himself probably couldn't tell the difference.

But one thing still bugs Ferrell.

The old black-and-white photos show a small vase sitting on a table in the southeast corner. She hasn't found one just exactly like it. Yet.

"I'll keep looking," Ferrell promises. "I'll find it."

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